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SUBJECT Proposed Selling of U.S. Weather Satellites

BOB McBRIDE: Tonight, the jobs of 600 Washington area federal workers are on the line.

Jim?

JIM VANCE: They may lose their jobs because the government wants to close down their small but important agency. The Reagan Administration wants to sell the National Environmental Satellite Service. It brings us valuable weather and land site pictures.

In here cover story tonight, Susan King reports on the storm of protests that proposed sale has kicked up.

Susan?

SUSAN KING: At first glance, it sounds like a good idea. The government sells the expensive satellite system --weather and land satellites -- to private enterprise, which then can run the system at a profit. And, in a snap, it says the Reagan commandment: Give unto business what it can do better than government.

So why the storm of protest?

To some congressmen, it's a simple case of dollars and cents. These satellites were launched in the early 60's with the help of government research money. Experimentally, they were too costly for business.

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Satellites are replaced every four years, and the Reagan Administration cost-cutters figure they can save big dollars by allowing private industry, not government, to launch the next one. Business would get the old satellites and the system at a price tag of \$330 million.

Still sounds good.

Except when you hear that it cost the government \$1.6 billion to build the system, and the government would promise to buy from that company the satellite pictures for a guaranteed \$450 million a year, more than the selling price of the system.

UNIDENTIFIED CONGRESSMAN: I would point out to the President that it is not a good deal to sell all the government infrastructure for \$350 million doesn't seem like a good deal to me.

KING: The 600 employees at the Earth Satellite Service would not go with the sale. They would be out of jobs.

UNIDENTIFIED MAN: They don't want us to quit and walk away and find other jobs until they know what they're going to do.

KING: Weather watchers would also be without. The sophisticated radar pictures showing the path of a storm, or in this case a snow storm, a regular feature of nightly television weather casts, could not be provided by the government to the public. And incredibly detailed pictures like this land taken by satellites more than a hundred miles up would be on the open market. They would not be government controlled, and that worries the Defense and intelligence establishment in Washington, who reminded the Reagan Administration that during the Falkland crisis the British planned military decision with the help of U.S. satellite weather information like this.

Not only would sensitive land and weather pictures be on the open market, they would go to the highest bidder.

The government might save money, but they would lose control.

Jim?

VANCE: Seems like there would be more than a few people who might agree with Congressman [name unintelligible] that this -- this isn't a good idea.

KING: I know, and all the evidence, at least that we're showing tonight, seems to pile up and say that it sounds like an idea that doesn't make any sense. There are people who have been cost analysts, with their ideas, and that kind of thing, and still think it's a good proposal, but they wouldn't talk to us.

[Laughter].

VANCE: All right Susan, thank you for what we have.